

The Chairman  
Cabinet Scrutiny Committee  
KCC  
Maidstone  
KENT

17<sup>th</sup> January 2011

Dear Sir/Madam

RE:- Cabinet Scrutiny Committee 19<sup>th</sup> January: Agenda regarding closure and redevelopment of Bowles Lodge.

As you will be aware I had requested to address to your Committee on 19<sup>th</sup> January in my capacity as Tunbridge Wells Borough Ward Member for Hawkhurst/Sandhurst, but I have suffered a slight stroke and am at present in the Conquest Hospital at Hastings. Therefore, would you kindly accept this written submission. I am aware that you have other speakers who will be presenting evidence regarding KCC logic and changes to the care service which has caused a raft of protest so I will focus on the so called Consultation, which in my opinion, is a disgraceful sham and has caused much local bad feeling against the County Council.

I have lived in Hawkhurst for over 30 years and about a year ago, along with other residents, picked up rumours that because of a land issue at Cranbrook the proposed Extra Care Housing Scheme would now transfer to Bowles Lodge, Hawkhurst site. Obviously over the following 3 or 4 months these rumours caused considerable concern but I was assured by KCC local Member, Roger Manning, that before anything was implemented there would be a full local consultation that would look at all angles. On 23<sup>rd</sup> June in conjunction with my wife, who is the Chairman of Springetts Trust which provides housing for older residents of limited means in Hawkhurst, we attended a meeting at the Queens Inn which consisted of Graham Gibben, Magaret Howard and 2 other KCC officers. My wife and I were the only two people of the local community present at the meeting.

In July Roger Manning attended a Hawkhurst Parish Council meeting and in answer to an outburst of public concern that there would be no proper consultation as the decisions had already been made and it was a "done deal", he undertook to arrange a public meeting and invite Graham Gibben as Cabinet Member and Director, Margaret Howard. He said he would ensure that they would present details and give necessary assurances about reacting to local opinion and by this include Cranbrook and Sandhurst. The meeting took place on July 29<sup>th</sup> and an estimated 250 people packed into the Primary School Hall. Although more assurances were given by Graham Gibben and Margaret Howard and questions recorded, at the end the general feeling was that the meeting was a PR exercise and the decisions had already been made. What did come out of the meeting was an

undertaking from Graham Gibben that, in conjunction with Roger Manning, he would thoroughly investigate 3 alternative sites; 2 large open sites at Swattenden (both owned by KCC), between Cranbrook and Hawkhurst; and Babies Castle (Hawkhurst) on the main A229 on the outskirts of the village. The Castle site is a large derelict building crying out for redevelopment, it has been up sale/lease for several years and has a large sign up outside. I knew from my Ward Councilor role that the site had Planning Consent for a 65 bed Care Home and 11 Close Care Cottages. Both TWBC and Hawkhurst Parish Council favor the redevelopment and my own view is that such a perfect opportunity must not be missed as it's development would address the very many concerns the whole community have about the plans already published and discussed at the public meeting. As important is the fact that Bowles Lodge – an exceptionally valuable site – would be perfect for redevelopment with housing – both private and affordable and it would also have the distinct advantage of addressing in part the perceived need for a further 192 properties, considered necessary between now and 2026 if present plans do not change. Such a sale and redevelopment would almost entirely liquidate KCC's costs and provide an adequate return for TWBC.

Such was my view that I attended a meeting at County Hall with Graham Gibben when I appraised him of the situation over Babies Castle and advised that my colleagues at TWBC were more than willing to get involved and finance could be available as a move from the Bowles Lodge site would free up a much needed housing site for the village. I told him that the sale of the houses would offset the purchase cost of Babies Castle. Amongst other things Graham promised to follow up the proposal with TWBC and approach the Babies Castle site owners. He undertook and promised to speak with Margaret Howard and then come back to me with the response.

After waiting several weeks, having not received any response from Graham Gibben and with local opinion mounting such that the in house "consultation" assessment had now become a total sham, I contacted Roger Manning who arranged another meeting with Graham. The meeting left me totally disillusioned as in a few minutes I was advised, together with Roger Manning, that under the PFI terms and conditions it was 2 years too late to change the site. Even so Appledore Developments, the owners of the site had been approached but they only wanted to "sell" beds in a complete development.

Graham said the reason he had not come back to me was because he had expected the (TWBC) local project team to investigate further. David Weiss was mentioned as the team coordinator and the following day I contacted Mr Weiss only to be told that there was no such team!!! Thus TWBC has not been fully involved.

It appears to me whatever suggestions have been put forward as alternatives to those proposed by KCC have been summarily dismissed. The so called 'public consultations' have been a total farce – nothing less than a public relations exercise to go through the motions to try and demonstrate that KCC have their residents welfare at heart. Perhaps this is best summed up with the quote that Graham Gibbens gave the Courier newspaper,

"we have looked at the other sites but have not found any to be as good as the proposed extra care sheltered housing at the Bowles Lodge site".

If I accept what Roger Manning has said, that he also has been left out of the local negotiations and like all of us has been misled by false information and unfulfilled undertakings Kent County Council's handling of the 'consultation' is called into question together with their credibility and integrity. In support of my Ward I am prepared to escalate this whole non-independent flawed consultation issue with our local Member of Parliament and I may support a call for a Judicial Review.

Hawkhurst Parish Council have never been consulted as a body by KCC to seek their collective view or invited to any consultation meeting. I am told that this also applies to Cranbrook and Sandhurst Parish Councils.

I request that your Committee seeks to delay the implementation of this unsafe Cabinet Members Decision to allow these disturbing consultation issues to be fully examined.

Yours faithfully

PP 

Cllr R J Weeden  
Ward Member for Hawkhurst/Sandhurst  
Tunbridge Wells Borough Council.

To whom it may concern.

I have authorized my wife to sign this letter on my behalf.